

Chicks in the Sticks – supporting rural women to lead in agriculture and natural resource management

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Abstract Rural women have an increasing role in agriculture and environmental management. However, women are still under-represented in community leadership positions, such as Landcare and farm production groups. The North Central Catchment Management Authority (CMA), and later the Goulburn Broken CMA, have used an innovative event 'Chicks in the Sticks' to bring together rural women to showcase their achievements, share knowledge, create new networks and build leadership capacity. Chicks in the Sticks events involve an outdoor twilight meal in a picturesque location, usually a unique environmental or sustainable farming site, with inspiring presentations from local women. For fun, participants are encouraged to wear cocktail dress and gumboots. Since its inception, over 400 rural women have attended five events. Evaluation feedback highlights the importance of women-only events and the need to bring together agricultural and environmental issues. Increased confidence amongst rural women has many flow-on benefits for natural resource management, sustainable agriculture and rural communities.

Keywords: leadership, environment, agriculture and gender balance.

Are you looking for inspiration? Are you wanting to celebrate the achievements of rural women? Looking to meet like-minded women in agriculture and the environment?

These nurturing and inspiring themes attract almost 100 women annually to Chicks in the Sticks events across western and northern Victoria. Initiated in the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority (CMA) region of Victoria in 2011, this innovative event idea spread to the North Central CMA region in 2013 and to the Goulburn Broken CMA region in 2015. 'Chicks in the Sticks' is a celebration of rural women's achievements and their vital contribution to agriculture and natural resource management (NRM) (Plate 1).

Plate 1. The 2015 North Central CMA Chicks in the Sticks, incorporating glamour, native flora and gumboots, was held along the Campaspe River at the historic DeGraves Mill in Carlsruhe, Victoria



Source: North Central Catchment Management Authority 2015.

Background

The notion of women's only events is nothing new, extending back millennia to when Traditional Owners practised men-only and women-only customs and business on Country. However, it is rarely used in current extension practices, with organisations preferring to reach out to as many

people as possible as they strive to meet investor-contracted participation rates and output targets.

Creating an event series that excludes men, both as participants or as guest speakers, was a genuine risk in the design of Chicks in the Sticks events. As it hadn't been tried before there was a risk it might fail to gain traction. However, an analysis of feedback and data collected from general field days held by the North Central CMA showed men are almost always the dominant gender at events and when negotiating on-farm landholder incentive programs. (This is discussed further in the methodology described in the 'Event Objectives and Outcomes' section). More broadly, women are also under-represented in community leadership positions (F Dattner 2017, pers. comm., March 2017). This also includes Landcare and farm production groups. Chicks in the Sticks was identified as an innovative event model, likely to engage women and increase their participation in CMA programs and events.

Event evaluation feedback (collected via participant evaluation surveys), paired with anecdotal feedback, indicated that women's participation needs to be encouraged using a different approach. In general, women told us they preferred different learning environments to men. They preferred a collaborative setting that allowed space and time for networking and discussion; while men typically prefer information passed on through presentations, hands-on demonstrations and group discussions. Women thrive in the safety of a female-only setting, preferring information and learning experiences featuring storytelling, personal experience and smaller group activity. Hence, a decision was made to specifically target a female demographic with Chicks in the Sticks.

The concept

Chicks in the Sticks is a field day at its core. You'll find all the tell-tale signs of a general extension event: the registration table, name tags, the bubbling urn, Lipton tea bags and stale instant coffee, but that's where the familiarity ends. Chicks in the Sticks events are designed by women, for women. They are bold, challenging and meaningful on a very personal level, whilst addressing broader agricultural and environmental issues.

Event theme

Fun and play are certainly key objectives of this style of event. To start with, the invitations are beautiful, welcoming and emphasise the exclusive nature of the event. Guests are invited to have some fun and dress up in their favourite frock and wear gumboots, which creates a wonderful aesthetic and acts as a conversation starter. The novelty of the event has a wide appeal and succeeds in getting participants back to subsequent events. A 2015 participant remarked that she continues to return to the events as they are: 'Brilliant motivation, inspiration and connection. Amazing positive and supportive culture and environment. New ideas and advice from others. So many brilliant ladies in the room'. Another guest stated that 'time out with other rural women is really important, not just for networking but just for fun'.

Event promotion

Advertising takes place months in advance so women can lock the date into their calendar, allowing primary caregivers to plan alternative family and work arrangements for the day. The invitation is open to all women involved in or interested in agriculture and/or the environment. Event invitations are distributed through the respective CMA's mailing list (e.g. farmers, Landcare members, past event participants), rural mailbox drops, social media, media releases, newspaper advertisements and/or radio interviews (Figure 1). Local community leaders and community groups (e.g. farming systems and Landcare groups) are also engaged in an informal working group to fine-tune event topics and locations, and help promote the event.

Event location

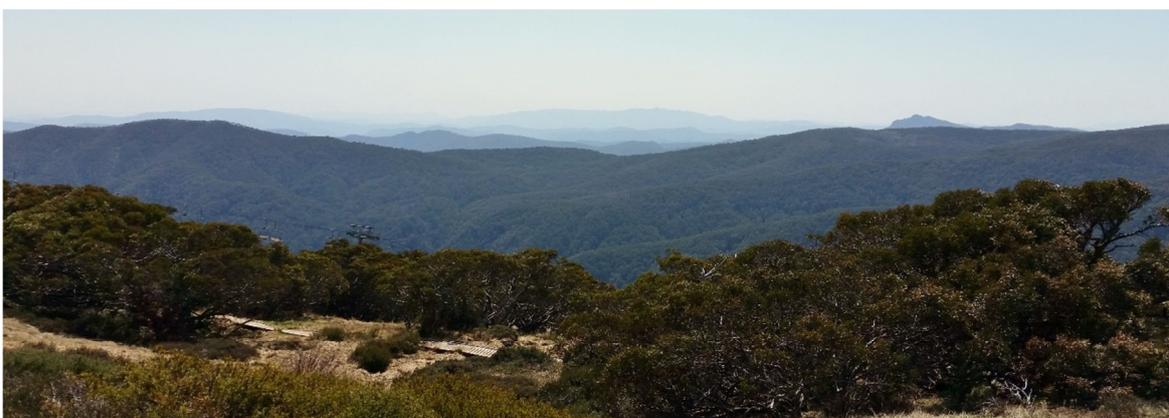
The events are held in unique locations often likened to a wedding or ball. There is splendour, detail, joy and plenty of flowers to ensure guests feel as though they are at a special event where their attendance is valued and that they are helping make a difference to NRM and agriculture. In addition, the events showcase the region's natural assets to connect people to their local environment (e.g. Plate 2). This is achieved through short 'walk and talks' around the wetland, farm or mountain-top with guest speakers explaining the history, ecology and what changes have been implemented to enhance the natural assets (e.g. biodiversity, water quality or soil health) (e.g. Plate 3).

Figure 1. Chicks in the Sticks branding and logos are vital features in the event’s promotion



Source: North Central and Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authorities.

Plate 2. The 2015 Goulburn Broken CMA Chicks in the Sticks included a tour of Mount Buller



Source: Goulburn Broken CMA 2015.

Plate 3. 2013 Keynote speakers



Speakers: (from left to right) Aunty Esther Kirby (Respected Barapa Brapa Elder), Libby Price (past ABC Country Hour presenter) and Katrina Myers (local farmer, Barham Avocados). Katrina discussed her father’s suicide when she was 15 and the importance of starting conversations about mental health to reduce the stigma of mental illness.

Source: North Central CMA 2013.

Event topics

The mix and balance of speakers, themes, locations and formats creates a unique event with no two events being alike. Local agricultural and environmental issues, an informal working group of local community leaders and community groups (e.g. farming systems and Landcare groups), past event evaluation feedback, and guest speaker availability determine the topics and themes for the events. See Table 1 for an example agenda from the 2015 Goulburn Broken CMA's Chicks in the Sticks event at Mount Buller.

Table 1. Agenda from the 2015 Goulburn Broken CMA's Chicks in the Sticks event

Time	Agenda Item
5.30 pm	Bus departs Mirimbah Park
6.00 pm	Bus arrives at Mt Buller (shelter opposite the Arlberg Hotel)
6.05 pm	Welcome and introduction from Ashley Rogers, Regional Landcare Facilitator, Goulburn Broken CMA
6.10 pm	Reversing the decline of the Mountain Pygmy-possum, Louise Perrin, Environmental Manager, Mt Buller and Mt Stirling Alpine Resort Management Board
6.50 pm	Buses make their way to Mirimbah Park
7.15 pm	Farm to fork feast
7.45 pm	Developing a brand and marketing your farm produce direct to consumers, Rowena Ellis, Long Lane Capers
8.15 pm	Awards and raffle
8.20 pm	Evaluation surveys, tea & coffee
8.45 pm	Buses depart Mirimbah Park

Source: Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority 2015.

Diverse discussion topics, not generally explored at typical farm and environment extension events, are also embraced and celebrated through the Chicks in the Sticks forum. These include: mental health, suicide prevention, personal wellbeing, self-care, nurturing a sense of place, connecting to nature and communicating your own value. Past project evaluation and feedback has indicated that these broader issues can in fact be barriers to change in agricultural and NRM industries. The sense of safety created by an all-female audience allows for challenging conversations. In particular, the sharing of personal stories and life lessons resonates powerfully with this audience.

Event objectives and outcomes

Methodology

The North Central and Goulburn Broken CMAs collect event evaluation surveys at all events to:

- measure participant demographics – occupation, age, address and if they own a property – size and enterprises
- evaluate event topics and delivery – guest speakers, topics and format
- assess changes in awareness, knowledge and/or skills as a result of attending the event
- measure intentions to make a change as a result of attending the event – e.g. adopt a new practice or follow-up a new contact
- identify opportunities for improvements and plan future activities/projects.

The paper-based survey was completed at the conclusion of each of event, with participant information only reported in summary form to maintain confidentiality. Of the 439 participants attending five events between 2013 and 2016, 73% of participants completed the evaluation surveys. The event outcomes for each objective are described below using a combination of anecdotal evidence and survey results. Unfortunately, survey questions weren't consistent across all the events so quantitative data isn't available for all performance measures.

Increased awareness and knowledge

Objective Increased awareness and knowledge of agricultural and NRM challenges and opportunities.

Outcome Ninety-eight percent of participants, from three of the events (n = 174), reported that the event had increased their awareness and knowledge of agricultural and NRM challenges and opportunities in the region. Challenges and opportunities discussed at events have included: protecting threatened species whilst accommodating nature-based tourism; the unique wildlife,

seasonal wetland system and rich cultural heritage of Little Lake Boort; and developing a product, brand and market for your farm produce.

Anecdotal evidence from event evaluations shows many participants previously had very little knowledge of the natural assets and innovative agricultural businesses in their own backyard. For example, participants at the Gunbower Forest event in 2013 were surprised to learn that the wetlands were internationally-significant under the Ramsar Convention.

Support networks

Objective Provide an opportunity for women involved in agriculture and NRM to network with one another and increase their support networks.

Outcome The events have succeeded in bringing together women involved in agriculture and NRM, and increasing their support networks. This has helped break down barriers and potential competitiveness between groups of people that might not normally associate with one another. For example, at the Boort Chicks in the Sticks event in 2014, local irrigators were surprised how little they knew about the natural flooding regimes of their local waterway when listening to a presentation from the CMA's Environmental Flows Manager.

Event evaluation survey results from the 2015 Goulburn Broken CMA Chicks in the Sticks event (n = 34) show that 90% of participants had increased their regional networks as a result of attending the event. Anecdotal feedback from the other events supports this result. A common theme arising from the event evaluations has been the need for more of these events across the regions, more time for networking with one another and the possibility of opening the event up to rural business women in general.

Confident leaders

Objective Increase the confidence and capacity of rural women to make changes in their lives, businesses and/or communities.

Background There is growing focus, visibility and support for rural women's leadership on a national scale, particularly in agricultural industries. The revival in 2017 of the Australian Women in Agriculture Ltd. and the The Invisible Farmer Project provides evidence of this. Feedback from rural women in the North Central CMA region suggests that the issue of visibility is exacerbated by the psychological barrier that many farming women still face - their inability to call themselves farmers.

Decisions at the farm level, and about agricultural systems and strategies more broadly, continue to be dominated by men, which can leave women without a voice at the table. This reinforces outdated stereotypes of a 'farmer's wife'. In reality, rural women are essential to almost every farming operation and the agricultural industry more broadly. One Chicks in the Sticks participant commented that despite growing up on a family farm, marrying a local farmer, raising her own family on a farm, being a partner in the farming enterprise and managing daily farm operations, after 40-plus years on the land she struggles to confidently refer to herself as a farmer.

Outcome Anecdotal evidence from event evaluations suggests that the Chicks in the Sticks events are helping reframe rural women's self-talk and their self-perception, with guest speakers helping participants recognise the extensive contribution they make in their respective sectors. Furthermore, the event topics and the ability to ask questions in a safe environment have helped build participants' personal leadership skills.

Key learnings

An important lesson learnt through designing the event format has been to understand and voice the need for taking an innovative approach to something as tried and tested as field days. Before any marquees are booked or invitations sent out, it is vital to clearly communicate why a women-only event is needed and highlight that there is an evidence-based participation gap in engaging women in more traditional sustainable agriculture and NRM extension events delivered through CMAs. Demonstrating the need for the event, the scale at which it would operate and the learning principles driving the content is key to pitching the idea to other CMA staff, project steering committees, media and community members. Furthermore, event organisers can demonstrate that they increase the involvement of local community members in the planning phase through local working groups.

Success breeds success: recognising the opportunity to engage with new faces and that those faces are vital to the decisions being made about our productive and natural landscapes, other CMA project staff have started designing events specifically targeted at women. One example was a recent High Tea held by the Campaspe River that was aimed at female landholders,

family members and partners that weren't being reached or communicated with as frequently as were their male counterparts. This meant they were less likely to understand the riparian restoration project's objectives or access the incentives that are available. Anecdotal feedback indicates that women on farms are just as, if not more, interested than men, when considering the environmental incentive programs. Hence, their inclusion in, and understanding of, CMA programs is essential to the overall protection and enhancement of rivers, wetland and soils.

Conclusion

The Chicks in the Sticks initiative provides an opportunity to address the challenge of engaging women. Female participation has all too frequently been disadvantaged by more traditional approaches to agriculture and NRM sector events. The future of Chicks in the Sticks events is bright. Each year registrations exceed expectations and waiting lists are generated. The demand for women-only events is growing and in turn the advice and feedback gathered from event participants will continue to be used to help develop new, innovative and truly inclusive CMA regional Landcare program activities.

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